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ABSTRACT

This document was prepared to aid Rhode Island schools in dealing with youth at risk of school failure. It defines at-risk students as young people who in danger of not completing school and notes that in Rhode Island over 25% of students who enter school fail to graduate from high school. It stresses the need for schools and communities to focus on the early identification and treatment of at-risk youth. Section I of the guide describes the role of the guide, which is to focus on ways schools can reduce the number of students who are at risk through timely interventions at an early grade, prevention programs that reduce the number of potentially at-risk students, and mobilization of community agencies in cooperation with the school district. Section II identifies characteristics of the at-risk student under the headings of academic, school/social, home/social, and personal/social characteristics. Section III presents considerations for action, suggesting that schools examine school characteristics, review current practices, and learn about successful approaches in the area. Section IV addresses the question of what can be done to help at-risk youth at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels; and reviews specific academic, advocacy, and structural or support strategies that can provide a starting point for a school-designed approach to helping at-risk youth. Section V concentrates on local action, including how to devise and implement a local district or school plan. (NB)

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AT-RISK STUDENTS

APPROACHES TO IDENTIFICATION AND INTERVENTION

CG 021004

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AT-RISK STUDENTS

APPROACHES
TO
IDENTIFICATION
AND
INTERVENTION

THE RHODE ISLAND
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

This publication was prepared for
The Rhode Island Department of Education
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This publication has been prepared to assist Rhode Island schools as they deal with the issue of youth at risk of school failure.

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OVERVIEW

At-risk students are young people who are in danger of not completing school. In Rhode Island over one quarter of the students who enter school fail to graduate from high school.

Students can be identified as at risk long before anyone would label them potential dropouts. In the past, the focus has been on the school dropout. This approach unfortunately directs attention at a result rather than at the cause of student problems. In most cases, if we try to deal with dropouts we are too late to be effective. The focus for schools and the community needs to be on the early identification and treatment of at-risk youth. That way the emphasis is on students who are still in the system, when schools can still make a difference.

To aid you in its use, this resource guide is divided into the following sections:

I. Role of the Publication
II. Who Is the At-Risk Student?
III. Considerations for Action
IV. What Can Be Done to Help?
V. Next Steps: Local Action

A great many factors contribute to students being at risk. Among the most important factors are: school success or failure, cultural background, family situation, and economic conditions. The most effective approaches to helping youngsters who might be at risk take into consideration all of the above factors that cause a student to be at risk. This means the best approach is probably complex and coordinates the efforts of school, social service agencies, the family, community programs, and others as needed.

Most school people accept this as true, but getting it to happen effectively is often difficult. There are things that schools can do to reduce the size of the at-risk student population. Some of these strategies can be implemented within schools. Others involve the school initiating a collaborative arrangement within the community for more comprehensive solutions.

I. THE ROLE OF THE PUBLICATION

This guide focuses on ways schools can reduce the number of students who are at risk. Maximum effectiveness will be achieved through

- timely interventions at an early grade,
- prevention programs that reduce the number of potentially at-risk students, and
- mobilization of community agencies to play a significant role in full cooperation with the school district.

This guide will not offer a magic solution or a cookbook recipe that schools can follow to reduce their at-risk population. There is no single program that will eliminate the problem of at-risk youth. In addition, various background factors that can potentially put a student at risk are well beyond the ability of the school to influence. This guide will provide a research-based framework for a school to identify students who are at risk and to set in motion a process to provide various types of assistance.

II. WHO IS THE AT-RISK STUDENT?

The key to prevention is identification of students who are potentially at risk. Early identification allows the school to intervene where appropriate, before major problems emerge. It is important that students' needs be met sensitively and in a targeted manner.

The individual characteristics listed below are cited so that the school or district can set up a method to monitor students who are at greater risk. These characteristics, shown through research as having a high correlation with students who drop out of school, are not listed to blame or label a student. Many students exhibit one or more of these characteristics but do not experience school failure. For monitoring and early intervention purposes, it is more likely that a student who exhibits two or more of these characteristics may also have greater likelihood of failing in school.

The characteristics of at-risk youth are:

A. Academic

- low basic skills test performance -- results significantly below peers or a consistently low set of scores on valid tests
- poor grades -- in basic skills areas or across all subject areas
- below grade level performance, especially in basic skill areas

B. School/Social

- one or more years older than other students in the same grade. This indicator has been shown to be the most significant single predictor of dropping out.
- attendance problem -- not attending school on a consistent basis (absent once a week or three or more times a month)
- discipline problem -- especially a pattern indicating that disciplinary action is not serving as a deterrent
- no extracurricular involvement
- frequent transfer between schools
- lack of motivation and/or interest in school

C. Home/Social

- family in lower economic level -- student participates in a free or reduced lunch program, for example
- unstable home
- low educational level of parent(s)/sibling(s)
- poor attitude of parent(s) toward school/graduation
- black, Hispanic, or Native American
- limited or no English proficiency

D Personal/Social

- employed in a job that interferes with schooling. Generally, employment over ten hours a week is considered potential for interference, over 15 hours, a serious threat.
- poor health or easily fatigued
- negative self-concept
- alcohol and/or substance abuse
- pregnant or parenting

If students with one or more of these characteristics are progressing normally in school, continue monitoring but don't intervene. On the other hand, if a student is failing academically, but doesn't exhibit the characteristics, identify the causes of academic failure (personal, social, home/family, or school) and plan an appropriate intervention.

III. CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACTION

As schools seek ways to reduce their at-risk student population, they are usually thinking of programs to add to their curriculum, or specific ways to treat students who exhibit certain at-risk characteristics. In order to be successful, it is important for a school to see its at-risk population in the context of its entire school. Individual programs may help, but the most effective approach will involve the entire school. The goal must be to teach all students in the most effective ways possible. You should:

1. examine your school to see if it has characteristics that have been shown to encourage students to leave;
2. review your staff and program strengths and build upon them; and
3. learn as much as possible about the characteristics of successful approaches to dealing with at-risk youth.

A. School Characteristics

The school must be aware of the reasons why students are dropping out of school -- reasons that include the characteristics of the school the student leaves as well as the environmental, familial, and personal factors that influence his/her choice. The school issues that help push at-risk students out of school were characterized by John Goodlad in A Place Called School. He identified:

- large schools and classes that allow students to easily feel disassociated with the goals and activities of the school.
- abuse of tracking, which impacts not only student achievement, but self-esteem, misconduct, and the likeliness of dropping out.
- misuse of standardized tests, which can come from overreliance on scores or misinterpretation of results, which can be misleadingly "label" students as academic problems.
- higher requirements without remediation or support for low achieving students, which puts students who are already experiencing academic difficulty further behind.
- emphasis on seat-time versus competency, which focuses students on performing certain activities rather than on achieving certain results.
- lack of support for minorities.

B. Review Current Practices

Identify the things going on in the school that involve students in a positive way. Those activities and programs, even if they have not been implemented with the intent of helping reduce the at-risk population, are a part of your school's program for helping at-risk youth. Inevitably, some youth at risk will have a better connection to school through those activities and practices that are in place and working effectively. The most effective use of a school's resources is to expand the use of strategies already working smoothly. Look at the total picture and adapt your current practices that may only be used with a certain population (e.g., peer-tutoring, special education IEP's, or career counseling services) for use with at-risk youth.

C. Additional Elements of Successful Approaches

Research shows that the most important element to successful approaches with at-risk youth is early intervention efforts that involve community resources. What follows are some further considerations that have been found to be important in addressing the needs of at-risk students or those potentially at risk.

- **Successful prevention programs require long-term, sustained resources.** Short-term attempts are not effective. At-risk prevention programs must become part of the school, and the district must be committed to maintaining the programs.

- **Change efforts that are dictated by a district office are not as effective as those decided upon jointly.**

- **Successful prevention efforts involve both building staff and specialists.**

- **Staff development needs to be a part of any program and must be supported by the school district.** Interventions sometimes require skills that were not previously needed. In order to be effective the program may require that teachers, counselors, and others acquire new skills.

- **Successful programs require a vision of success and commitment to reaching the goal.** The staff responsible for operating the program must believe that it can work and must be committed to seeing that it does work.

- **Students must be provided opportunities to develop relationships with adults.**

IV. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP?

With the recent national attention on at-risk youth, much has been published concerning specific programs or approaches that appear to be successful. Many of these programs offer good, concrete approaches to dealing with these complex issues, but it should be stressed that few programs have had extensive evaluation or shown truly significant results.

Many of the examples of specific strategies described in this section can be adapted for use at any grade level. It is important, however, that specific attention is given to certain things in elementary school. These areas of focus evolve a slightly different agenda for middle school, changing emphasis again in high school.

In **elementary school**, focus on

- academic achievement of basic skills
- regular attendance
- parent involvement when possible.
- connecting with community services.

In **middle school**, focus on

- having students perform at grade level in basic skills
- giving every student a feeling of "connectedness" to school
- giving extra attention to "invisible students," those who are not yet failing or in difficulty but who are not living up to potential

In **high school**, focus on

- creating a variety of situations in which each student can feel that school is worthwhile
- offering easy access for students to get assistance with academic or personal difficulties
- preparing students for careers and linking them with jobs

In general, successful school programs are built on three basic approaches to assisting at-risk youth:

- academic
- advocacy
- structural

Specific programs, especially those that are more comprehensive in design, generally combine features of at least two of these approaches.

Academic Approaches

The major focus of academic approaches is on assisting students to perform basic skills at grade level. The emphasis is on academic achievement.

Example: A third grade teacher assesses all students' current progress, past grades in basic skills, and reviews longitudinal test score data to identify which students are at the greatest risk of not achieving grade level performance in basic skills by the end of the year. The teacher designs a set of academic interventions for high-risk students to increase their chances for success. Such interventions might include peer tutoring or matching higher and lower achieving students for intensive work in basic skills at certain times. Additional interventions might include reteaching instruction for these students, using very concrete approaches.

Generally, academic approaches focus on making adjustments to what goes on in the classroom in order to help those lowest achieving students succeed. This includes expanding the variety of teaching strategies available to teachers, with special emphasis on those strategies that seem to have the greatest effect on student learning. When teaching modes and strategies are combined, research shows they have the greatest potential for improving student learning. Some specific strategies include:

- learning style theory to teach two different types of students;
- cooperative learning, especially effective for higher order thinking, problem solving, social skills, and attitudes;
- direct instruction, including guided practice and reteaching to objective;
- mastery learning, including breaking subject matter into small manageable pieces, teaching to objective, assessing progress, providing direct feed back to students, and allowing differentiated time for mastery of objective.

In addition to teaching strategies, several teaching practices can be use in combination with any other model. An example of such include use of "wait time" or waiting at least four seconds after asking a question of a student before moving to another student or giving additional information.

In combination with teaching strategies, teachers can employ effective classroom management techniques and positive discipline practices that will enhance the learning environment in the classroom.

What follows are several other examples of **Academic Strategies**.

Computer Assisted Instruction: Effective use of technology can be employed in many different ways to bring students to grade level in basic skills. Such applications have come a long way in the past few years, leaving behind the old notion of simply using computers for drill and practice on skills students were not grasping to begin with. However, effective uses of computers and other technology with at-risk youth requires an investment in hardware, software and staff development and a commitment to keep up with the growing list of resources that are currently being developed.

One example of a most impressive, results-oriented use of computers to assist students with achieving competency in basic skills is the Comprehensive Competencies Program of the Remediation and Training Institute in Washington, DC. Originally developed as part of the Job Corps Training Partnership Act, the program, which can be offered through schools or community-based agencies, is generally seen as a "quick fix" for students who have not acquired basic skills. The Academic Competencies program presents learning in bite-sized lessons covering skills ranging from beginning math and reading through first year college. As with other computer programs, the instruction is individually paced and there are multiple feedback loops for keeping track of a students' progress. These approaches work best with students who have motivation to learn. Other applications of technology, such as use of videodiscs to provide shared context experiences to disadvantaged children, are being piloted by The Peabody School at Vanderbilt University. While not developed to the same level of sophistication, commercially available videotapes that mirror experiences such as a trip to the zoo can also be used to enrich experience.

Accelerated Learning: The traditional approach to dealing with students who are not achieving mastery of basic skills is to slow them down and remediate. One result is that a student can fall farther behind in school, with the potential of additional, complex consequences -- like development of a poor self-concept, etc. Accelerated learning is based on the opposite approach, that a student who is not achieving basic skills needs more and different kinds of academic work. Based on the work of Dr. Henry Levin of Stanford University, the accelerated school approach is a transitional elementary school designed to bring disadvantaged students to grade level in basic skills by the end of the sixth grade. The curriculum emphasizes language arts, applying learnings to everyday problems, peer tutoring, cooperative learning, parent involvement, and an option of an extended day with additional offerings. While Levin's work is based on whole schools, the key approach, that of accelerating the progress and expectations of poorly achieving students rather than slowing them down, can be employed in any school setting with modifications and appropriate support.

Other general examples of intervention strategies that are primarily academic in focus include:

- Enrichment Programs: Extended day, additional courses, opportunities for field trips, or other programs that add to the students experience or opportunity to make academic progress.

- Extensive use of early screening/diagnostic tools and alternative placements for students: This approach builds upon Chapter One services, established transitional kindergarten or first grade classes, and the like.

Advocacy Approaches

The key focus of advocacy is on taking a personal interest in the success of a student in school and, by doing so, helping to counteract forces that might cause the student to fail.

Example: Middle school students identified at risk of school failure are individually paired with an advocate -- someone from the community, like a Big Brother/Big Sister or perhaps an individual through a school-partnership program. The advocate role is to "check in" with the student, to encourage progress. This will take different forms, depending on the individuals involved. Each of the following are activities the advocate might undertake:

- call student to check on why he/she was absent from class; *the message is somebody noticed you were absent, it does matter that you go to class.*

- take the student to a special event connected to school or outside of school; *the message is someone cares about you, you matter, and there are good things in life for you, too.*

- tutor the student in a subject area; *the message is it takes effort to succeed but there is help available to you, someone cares if you succeed.*

Teachers, counselors, family members, and even organizations take on advocacy roles in different forms.

Examples of <u>Advocacy Strategies</u> include:

- One-on-One Advocate or Ombudsman: Many students at risk come from backgrounds that do not provide them with an outlook that school matters. In other cases, because of family or other situations, the necessary support for a student to achieve in school is lacking. In yet other cases, a student may have such a poor self-concept or be so alienated from his or her family that the family is not in a position to positively influence the student. What the student may need most is someone who will act to influence her to see that what she does matters and that school can be to her benefit. This strategy can include intensive interaction, or little interaction; it can be organized by the school

or run by chance. The more invested the advocate and the student are in each other, the more effectively this approach will work.

Extracurricular Programs:

- A school might make it a policy that each student become involved in an extracurricular or outside of school program. The school would take on the role of pairing the student with a program of interest if one was not naturally established. The school would also see that any necessary support was available so that the student could take part fully in the program.

Teacher-Advisor Programs:

- Another approach to advocacy assigns a teacher a group of students to work with to offer additional assistance, monitor progress, conduct home visits and generally assist. The goal is for the student to have a personal mentor to turn to within the school setting. In some schools other adults within the school, including administrators and janitors, can also serve as advisors/advocates.

Two examples of unusual advocacy programs include:

- A New York City philanthropist pledged to pay for a college education for 8th grade students who achieved the grades necessary to graduate from high school and attend college. In addition, he supplied a support structure to assist the students in meeting that goal. This personal example, while individual in nature, has provided a basis for other programs that supply incentives for students to gain college educations.

- The Cleveland Public Schools have established a fund to assist students with certain grades to attend college. All students, beginning with the 8th grade, receive counseling on education options and have money deposited into their personal account for each "A" or "B" grade earned. Upon graduation, the student can withdraw funds from their account to pay tuition for college or other continued schooling.

Structural and Support Approaches

The focus of structural and support approaches is on adjusting functions and delivery methods within the school and between the school, home, and community to enhance the chances of at-risk youth succeeding in school. Additionally, it includes the support mechanisms necessary to sustain the interventions.

Example: The school understands that many of its at-risk students have very poor attendance, and this contributes to their poor academic performance. The school makes a commitment to call each student who is absent by 9:00 of the day they are out to determine the reason for absence. In order to insure this, the school employs two parents for several hours each morning to make the telephone calls. The parents then provide information to the administrators and teachers for appropriate follow-up.

What follows are a variety of examples of **Structural Strategies**. These examples range from some that are fairly commonly practiced to more innovative or far-reaching approaches.

- Provide adequate opportunities for counselors to develop strong community linkages to provide support for particular students.

- Institute an in-school suspension policy so that students are not dismissed from school for disciplinary action. This policy could be implemented in such a manner so as to intensify activity on academic interventions.

- Provide options for teachers in middle school to stay with the same group of at-risk students over time, achieve stable relationships, conduct home visits, and build bonds of trust.

- Institute a policy of "leave of absence" for students who feel they need to take some time out of school as an alternative to students withdrawing from school permanently.

- Consider changes in grading that would allow for only an A or B in a subject. Have students continue to work on a subject until mastery. This approach, which has been used in several of Sizer's Essential Schools, will minimize unnecessary negative feedback and could have consequences for the length of the school day/year.

It should be noted that almost all interventions, academic and advocacy, have logistical elements to them, however minor, that need to be attended to in order to succeed. Considerations of the nature of staff development that will be needed in order to implement any intervention might be considered under the "structural strategies" because it is something fundamental to the way things need to be done.

The above designations provide a framework within which a school can construct a basic approach to helping students at risk achieve greater success. If a school uses this framework as it considers interventions it may discover why a particular strategy will or will not be successful. It may be, for example, that a school focuses on academic interventions, but finds that the teachers can not accomplish the goals for students at risk because of a lack of time. Some structural solutions could be employed to put the strategy back on target -- for example, restructuring time in the school day for the teacher to devote concentrated time to students at risk, or pairing with upper-grade students for tutoring assistance. These structural and support changes take the commitment of the school and, ideally, the district.

V. NEXT STEPS: LOCAL ACTION

Ideally, the entire school district will make a coordinated effort to serve its population of students at risk. Most of the direct work will be accomplished at the school. The following steps are written for the district, but it is understood that each must be taken at the school level as well. In the absence of a districtwide approach, the individual school can undertake each step as it relates to that school.

- Collect data on your district's situation.

  Conduct a self-study or build upon one that was conducted as part of the Basic Education Program. The study should look at those who drop out of your district to establish a profile of the district's dropout population. Information should be collected from student records, surveys, and interviews with the students who have dropped out as well as interviews with students who have been identified as being at risk but who remain in school.

  In order to collect the necessary data, it is best to assemble a task force that includes representatives of the total school

community (e.g., parents, students, school staff, community agency workers, business and industry representatives). By involving a broad-based task force, it is more likely that the future steps of identifying resources to meet the identified needs and implementing a plan to assist at-risk youth will have wider acceptance and credibility.

- Assess the district's policies, practices, and programs.

  Determine which are most effective in helping, and which serve to exacerbate the trouble of the at-risk population.

- Identify and assess potential resources and options.

  Look within the community as well as the school to identify existing as well as potential resources that may be called upon to assist in your efforts to reduce the number of at-risk students.

  Research possible interventions and assess which strategies are best for your district. Begin to identify possible interventions, based on those strategies or programs that seem to have some potential for serving students whose profile seems to match your district's or school's.

  Assess the programs that have been identified by the task force to determine how each would fit within the general school and community structure. It is important to look at what will be required in terms of time and resources to adopt or adapt the policies, procedures, and programs that are under consideration.

  The most effective plan will consist of policies, procedures, and programs that allow for coordination to provide support, early identification, and appropriate program interventions necessary to reduce the number of at-risk students within your school district.

- Construct a comprehensive plan.

  Identify the changes that need to be established and implemented. Identify the tasks and when each needs to be completed. There should be a person/position who has responsibility and the resources available to accomplish each task. Include staff development in the plan. Understand how the plan is connected to the overall school improvement effort in the district.

- Seek public support for the plan.

  Make the plan public. This will help to insure that the plan is implemented and should attract community attention so that additional resources may become available.

- Implement the plan.

  The best plan is worthless unless implemented. Make sure the goals are achieved and the timeline observed. Inevitably, circumstances will occur that force changes in the plan and possibly in the goals. Careful attention to implementation will allow for modifications to be made in a timely fashion. Once implementation is underway progress should be assessed and revisions made as necessary.

- Evaluate results.

  Assess the effect on student outcomes. Continue modifications in the plan until desired outcomes are reached.

- Review progress on an ongoing basis and continue revisions as necessary.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that there are many factors that put students at risk of failing in school; many of the strongest factors come from sources outside of school. No matter what background a child has when he/she enters, it is the school's responsibility to assist that child in learning basic skills and in reaching his or her potential. In many cases the school faces tremendous obstacles in reaching this goal.

It is incumbent upon the school to understand strategies for dealing with all students and thus prevent or reduce the need for costly remediation strategies or interventions after the student has already failed. Early identification of students at risk of school failure is essential. Appropriate early interventions that will assist the student by preventing failure must be undertaken. Whenever possible the school must enlist the support and understanding of parents and community agencies to reach the goal of assisting every student.

In order for schools to identify potential at-risk students at the earliest time possible, the school has to know what the early warning signs are. Students at risk of failing in school often experience difficulty in mastering basic academic skills. In addition, they may disproportionately come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and from families with other members who have not attained high levels of education. Schools need to be prepared to teach all students, regardless of their background or circumstances. Schools must carefully monitor students with early signals that they are at risk without contributing to the problem and creating self-fulfilling prophecies.

Schools need to understand their own population and design an overall school approach that builds on the school's and community's existing strengths, combines features of academic intervention and personal attention, and reaches the young person early enough to make a significant difference. This means schools must pay particular attention to students at risk before the end of third grade.

Successful practices for working with students at risk will deal with the problem by combining different approaches. This publication has reviewed specific academic, advocacy, and structural or support strategies that can provide a takeoff point for a school designed approach.

The next steps are at the local level -- to devise and implement a local district or school plan. This process provides the best opportunity to be successful in reducing the number of students at risk.

Although there are many demands on our schools it is imperative to follow through on the suggestions presented in this guide. In many cases this is because the school provides the best chance for a child's future success. We need to do everything possible to fulfill that promise for each student.